

# Unsettling geographies of volunteering and development

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This article critically examines the geography of volunteering in relation to international development. We identify the investments involved in sustaining the North–South imaginaries that have come to dominate scholarship in this field and explore new ways of unsettling this geography. We draw together empirical material from five different research projects, conducted with distinct thematic and geographical foci over a six-year timeframe. We do so in order to show how existing geographies of volunteering and development have produced fixed understandings of agency and experiences in diverse contexts, meanwhile side-lining the temporalities associated with such fixings. We highlight how the continued privileging of northern mobilities, temporalities and biographies has segregated particular settings and types of volunteering and obscured other, often shared and sometimes co-produced development processes, relationships and spaces. In developing a new approach, we first emphasise the importance of looking at the ‘hidden geometries’ that shape the individual, institutional and organisational articulations that are central to the relationship between volunteering and development. Second, we introduce the idea of a flattened topography to level the emphasis on difference in the geographies associated with this relationship. We aim to make visible new volunteers and development actors as well as reveal different rhythms and routines of volunteering, and different identities, biographies and forms of career and life-making connected with volunteering and development.

**Key words** international development; flattened topographies; relational space; volunteering; temporalities; biographies

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## Introduction

In his article ‘The geography of volunteer tourism: place matters’, James Keese (2011) argues that destination is primary in the recruitment of international volunteers by non-government organisations (NGOs). Here we question the dominance of international volunteers in development volunteering scholarship and explore geography as more than place and destination. We interrogate the geographical imaginary that frames volunteering research and examine the extent to which current geographies of volunteering are able to contain the tensions and contradictions associated with contemporary international development, and their transcendence of established North–South spatial imaginaries. We argue that the ‘global work’ (Jones 2008) of volunteering in development is more than work in a specific place in the South. We conceptualise it as something that happens where a volunteer is located within a specific temporality, which is shaped by

a set of overlapping and shifting social, economic and political relationships within and between places. Such forms of global work mark a moment in time, but also make up part of people’s longer lives. Volunteer lives cross different terrains, make links across and within South and North and are read and interpreted backwards and forwards as significant moments of meaning-making over a lifetime. By introducing such a temporal and narrative dimension to the analysis of volunteering in development, we seek to critique relational conceptualisations of space which, while being critical of the over-determination of spatial binaries (e.g. North–South, formal–informal), are nevertheless still prone to them. We bring centre stage the shifting kinds of agency volunteering promises and produces for diverse interest groups associated with both volunteering and development agendas.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first part interrogates the geographies of volunteering and development and analyses the factors that have shaped

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the re-imagining of volunteering in recent times. We emphasise the persistence of specific geographies and examine the different investor interests that have helped sustain them. In the second and third sections we draw together a range of contemporary and theoretical debates from Geography and Tourism Studies to build a framework for examining volunteering and development more critically. We explore the ways in which the 'hidden geometries' of volunteering and development produce unexpected spaces of coming together for different actors, which both confound and complicate spatial binaries and expose their over-determination. We develop the idea of a flattened topography of volunteering and development to unsettle their established geographies, highlighting different rhythms, routines and biographies that cut across South and North.

### Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data collected from a series of research projects focused on volunteering and development across a period of six years. Table I summarises each project focus, the types of data produced and timeframe of data collection. It also highlights the institutional collaborations and volunteering sector partnerships involved in co-producing research agendas, data and outputs, where relevant. As well as generating data as discrete projects in themselves, drawing together these projects provides an opportunity to look between different volunteer categories, mobilities and development contexts, revealing new connections and similarities. Data coding was conducted for each project separately, reflecting the different contexts of the distinct pieces of research. In the analysis for this paper we revisited these coding structures and focused on looking for patterns and commonalities as well as differences between the findings. Our engagements with different sector actors during and in-between projects provided further insights that are not contained by a specific project or its associated timeframe, but reflect the diverse institutional framings of volunteering and the involvement of multiple stakeholders across different sites, and our co-production of knowledge with them.

Our initial engagement with Voluntary Service Overseas, a leading development volunteering NGO, was through an ESRC seminar series that focused on international volunteering and citizenship and subsequent AHRC-funded research on a specific category of volunteer subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> The latter explored the before and after of young British faith-based volunteers in Latin America working on short-term placements. Our research with volunteers who participate in a South African conservation project then reflected a purposeful attempt to explore volunteering *in situ* and to capture longer term mobilities and commitments.

It also responded to a concern to understand how volunteers' engagement with development may sit outside the programming of development projects and link to wider agendas such as conservation and volunteer tourism, for example. Along with the research in India (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2012), this also provided an opportunity to explore forms of coming together through volunteering that go beyond established ideas of 'host' and 'beneficiary'. Through the research on Diaspora volunteers and national Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers, we sought to engage further with different volunteer categories to explore and interrogate the distinctiveness and difference of the international volunteers we had first researched. These processes, together with the wider projects outlined in Table I, have informed the data we have selected for citation here and the critique of international volunteering and development that we elaborate in what follows.

### A partial geography of international volunteering

International volunteering is receiving substantial scholarly attention. Initially subsumed within more generic fields like tourism (Wearing 2001) and education (e.g. Heald 2003; Wade 2000), more specific research emerged from the mid-2000s addressing economic agendas including the relationship between globalisation and international service (Lewis 2006), the commodification of international volunteering and its use as a form of capital (Jones 2005 2008; Simpson 2005) and international volunteering's role in business development and Corporate Social Responsibility (Hills and Mahmud 2007). More recent research has investigated the ways in which employers and recruitment agencies view the experiences of international volunteers in an increasingly global job market (Jones 2011) and has sought to understand volunteer tourism in terms of its production of neoliberal subjects through the dissemination of feelings and practices of entrepreneurship (Vrasti 2013).

Research is also focusing on citizenship, with Lorimer (2010) addressing environmental citizenship and others examining different forms of cosmopolitanism (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013; Craggs 2010; Rovisco 2009; Snee 2013) and partnership (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Schech *et al.* 2015). In these contexts, wide-ranging scholarship has addressed how volunteers understand their experiences as part of a faith journey (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013; Brickell 2013; Hopkins *et al.* 2015) and/or as an expression of transnational solidarity (Henderson 2009). Research has also explored how volunteers' practices link to geographies of care, responsibility, 'lifestyle politics' and emotion as people

**Table 1** Data collection by research project and collaboration

<i>Location and flow of volunteers</i>	<i>Title and data</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Institutional set up/collaboration</i>
UK volunteers in South America	Youth transitions, international volunteering and religious transformations: the experiences of young evangelical Christians in Latin America 22 pre-departure and 22 post-return interviews, 4 focus groups and 14 solicited diaries during placement. 10 stakeholder interviews	2009–10	Faith-based volunteering through country-based short-term (6 weeks–3 months) placements in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Peru	Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/G016461/1), Collaborative project with Peter Hopkins [Principle Investigator] and Elizabeth Olson <sup>2</sup>
European and UK volunteers in South Africa Returned volunteers in UK	Conservation volunteering 12 interviews with European volunteers of different ages in South Africa during placement 1 interview with South African paid volunteer manager, himself an ex volunteer 2 life history interviews conducted in the UK with a British couple who reside part of the year in South Africa and are long-term volunteers in the project	2011	Volunteer tourism project at a wildlife centre and outreach programme This project has been running for more than 15 years and started when a commercial enterprise donated land, water and electricity on its site for a cheetah sanctuary. Over time this expanded and now also involves raising awareness about cheetahs as an endangered species through a visitors' centre where tourists can see and touch cheetahs and via an extensive education programme for local schools	Newcastle University funded research
Indian NGOs in settings hosting international volunteers	Life histories of South Indian NGO activists 15 Life history interviews with NGO staff and leaders from organisations in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, working in partnership with a capacity building NGO with whom Baillie Smith has a long research and practice partnership	2009	South Indian NGO activists and leaders	Collaborative research with Dr Katy Jenkins funded by Northumbria University
UK volunteers in Nigeria and Nepal	Diaspora volunteering: promoting flexible ways of re-engagement, volunteering and development in Nigeria and Nepal Semi-structured interviews with 2 diaspora associations in the UK, 14 Nigerian diaspora volunteers, 11 Nepalese diaspora volunteers, representatives of 6 volunteer host organisations in Nigeria and 10 volunteer host organisations in Nepal. Semi-structured interviews	UK, Nigeria and Nepal, 2012–2013	Diaspora volunteers	Collaborative research funded by Northumbria University with co-funding from VSO and Newcastle University

(Continued)

**Table 1 (Continued)**

<i>Location and flow of volunteers</i>	<i>Title and data</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Institutional set up/collaboration</i>
	or focus group discussions with 9 community participants, informal interviews with 12 volunteering/government stakeholders in Nigeria and Nepal			
National volunteers from Red Cross national societies in South and North	Research and practice-based engagement with the International Federation of Red Cross IFRC and co-production of the IFRC Global Review on Volunteering (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015) Fieldwork conducted in 158 countries through volunteer interviews (240), stakeholder interviews (38), survey (340) and eight case studies	2013–2015	Volunteers and volunteer managers (also voluntary) across Red Cross Red Crescent national societies in South and North; volunteering, humanitarianism and development stakeholders	Research funded by IFRC (supported by American, Australian, Burundi, British, Finnish, French, British and Spanish Red Cross National Societies) and conducted by IFRC and Northumbria University

aim to ‘do good’ (e.g. Brown 2005; Butcher and Smith 2015; Mostafanezhad 2013a; Sin 2010), move beyond aid-framed relationships (Palacios 2010) or become and act as global citizens (e.g. Lough and McBride 2013; Lyons *et al.* 2012). Volunteer tourism scholarship has examined volunteer identity, authenticity and emotions, including providing a growing body of research on international volunteering and affect (e.g. Crossley 2012; Griffiths 2014) and intersections with celebrity and popular humanitarianism (Mostafanezhad 2013b).

Despite this growing interest in international volunteers as new development actors, with some exceptions in Geography (e.g. Sin 2010) and Tourism and Development Studies (e.g. Mostafanezhad 2013b; Vrasti 2013), there has been limited critical research conceptualising the wider relationship between volunteering and the changing development landscape. Persistent North–South imaginaries in both volunteering practice and research largely explain these omissions. To date, each has placed most emphasis on work within and on the global South. This in part reflects established North–South, volunteer–host understandings framed by what Gillian Hart (2001) has called big ‘D’ development,<sup>3</sup> as well as donor demands for evaluations of the effectiveness of international volunteers in achieving development objectives on the ground. Focusing on ‘D’ development-framed encounters generates understandings that remain rooted within the instrumental, professionalised and programmatic approaches shaped by

dominant development discourses and practices. However, understandings of international volunteering and development are inevitably messier than theories of them would suggest.

### *Changing understandings of international volunteering*

Alongside popular critiques, such as the YouTube video parodying the ‘gap yah’ student (VM Production and the Unexpected Outcomes 2010), a growing number of international volunteers are themselves producing critical scholarship, illustrated by the number of undergraduate, master’s and PhD dissertations emerging on volunteering and development. Much of this work is of a reflexive nature, emphasising that volunteers often learn and gain most from the experience. This chimes with the growing emphasis from diverse stakeholders in the sector on their capacity to develop volunteers whose influence on national citizenship and global equity emerge on their return as much as during their stay overseas. Stakeholder interest in volunteers as development actors is also increasingly part of a wider policy agenda linked to achieving global development objectives. This can be seen in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (e.g. Brodie 2009; Turner 2013), and more recently has been strategically promoted by volunteering organisations as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Haddock and Devereux 2015), which are being rolled out in times of austerity and economic slowdown (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015, 89). In these explorations and

re-framings of volunteering, the experiences of volunteers from Australasia, Europe and North America have dominated research. The northern volunteer is privileged as the principal actor, the one whose experiences matter and whose agency is engaged with, albeit often critically. This is not to deny research on southern perspectives on international volunteering and volunteers (e.g. Frilund 2015; Sin 2010), but to highlight that such work can also produce a focus on perceptions of the northern volunteer by actors and hosts in the South.

More significant challenges to established geographies of volunteering and development are being generated by recent changes in the landscape of development. The changing geopolitics of aid and new economic fortunes mean that some former recipient countries, now among the fastest growing economies in the world, are themselves becoming significant aid donors (see Mawdsley 2012; Mawdsley and McCann 2011; Tan-Mullins *et al.* 2010). These factors are beginning to challenge established narratives of development, poverty and responsibility, shaping how volunteering is understood and practised globally. In the context of the UK government's International Citizen Service programme, for example, young UK volunteers are paired with young national volunteers. In a similar vein, the NGO FK Norway prioritises mutual and South–South exchange models. Such examples are illustrative of the recent rise in popularity of South–South volunteering among volunteer engaging actors more generally, and is an important indication of how understandings of international volunteering are beginning to shift (Baillie Smith *et al.* forthcoming). While building tentative connections beyond established geographies of development and volunteering, however, South–South volunteering is nevertheless set up as a counterpoint to North–South in such framings. As such, it illustrates the challenge and the difficulty of stepping outside the binary ordering of development space that a relational geographies approach on the one hand seeks to critique, and yet on the other, often relies on in order to make its case in geographically recognisable terms.

Underlying the above geographical dilemma is a conceptual and methodological emphasis on a time-bound individual, reproducing a vision of international volunteering rooted in discourses of neoliberal professionalisation and northern constructions of the subject. A dominant approach in tourism, development and geography literatures has been to capture before-and-after experiences of volunteers using qualitative interviews/focus groups or mixed methods/quantitative surveys. These usually adopt a compressed time-frame and have a strong focus on single projects or particular cycles of volunteer activity. The emphasis on before-and-after analyses is defined by the temporal frame of the northern individuals and sending organisations,

rather than those of host communities and their often sustained hosting over time. While a growing number of ethnographic accounts of volunteer tourism, which potentially capture experiences that go beyond 'before' and 'after' timeframes, are emerging in Tourism Studies, these too tend to be based on individual sites or projects (e.g. Barbieri *et al.* 2012; Broad 2013; Prince 2017), and often focus more on the volunteers than host communities. Such an approach risks producing a fixed view of volunteering that occurs in certain places in the South, relatively isolated in space and time.

As a consequence of the above factors, much research peripheralises the multiple mobilities and fixings that volunteering produces, and instead becomes preoccupied with northern mobilities and their affects, further contributing to the entrenchment of a North–South binary of national/international volunteering discourses. This has restricted engagement with wider experiences of volunteering and development, tying scholarship mainly to formal volunteering processes managed by the types of organisations that register in popular understandings of international volunteering, volunteer tourism and the gap year, for instance, mentioned above. This excludes less formal international volunteering activity, such as through faith-based institutions like churches and mosques or personal family and friendship ties, including those of Diaspora communities, a theme we will return to later. In this way northern agents and agencies, and fixed locational imaginaries of here and there, rich and poor, donor and recipient are privileged and reproduced. In order to unsettle this geography of volunteering and development other – hidden, partially visible, ignored, trivialised, marginalised – stories and experiences need to be brought into view. Addressing such an agenda, however, first requires us to understand why a partial geography of volunteering has been so persistent in recent years.

### *Investors in geographies of international volunteering*

The dominant geography of international volunteering discussed above is not accidental, but reflects significant investments in its institutions, effects and imaginaries. While NGOs and religious organisations are perhaps traditionally the best-known facilitators of volunteering in development, volunteering has become framed and performed in increasingly global ways and diverse institutional spaces as new partnerships have been formed. For example, VSO, the leading UK International volunteering NGO, not only works with NGOs, the state and other civil society actors, but also with a range of public and corporate institutions (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). International volunteering has become a vibrant and diverse sector, playing a key role in state efforts to construct new forms of



citizenship premised on active engagement in civil society organisations and spaces over the last few years (e.g. Griffiths 2014; Stern *et al.* 2011, 5). In Ireland in 2013, for example, the Minister of State for Trade and Development announced a new Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative as part of the country's new Policy for International Development – One World, One Future – placing particular emphasis on mature volunteers:

Given the recent increase in early retirements in the public sector I believe there is huge potential, in particular, to attract interest from more mature volunteers who have a unique range of skills and experience that can be shared overseas. (Costello 2013, np)

Here, we can see how the state's scaling back of the public sector comes together with state aid policy through international volunteering. In the USA, international volunteering has often been framed in terms of promoting international understanding and as a feature of US foreign policy. This was evident in Barack Obama's first UK state visit in May 2011, when he made a public commitment to greater cooperation between VSO and Peace Corps, the respective UK and US state-supported international volunteer organisations. In this way international volunteering becomes part of global diplomacy, an expression of what Nye (2004) describes as 'soft power' in international politics. Its high public profile provides a means to perform state commitments to global humanity and 'doing good', underscoring ideas of particular countries as good global citizens.

At the heart of international volunteering is a vision of a linked and sometimes co-dependent, co-producing world, but one that nevertheless continues to ascribe elite volunteers from elsewhere with agency and influence to act into that space. Dominant imaginaries of volunteering fix geographies of development in ways that resonate with established popular ideas of need, authority and responsibility. Such ideas about international volunteering resonate with and sustain persistent public imaginaries of the South as places that are lacking or deficient in ways that northern benevolence or charity can address (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013; Crossley 2012; Simpson 2004). Such Orientalist imaginaries (Said 1995) are historically and culturally rooted, working to reinforce established geopolitical orderings and identities. In this way, international volunteering is part of a history of ideas and imaginaries in which significant investment in development is tied to postcolonial and geopolitical ambitions.

Nevertheless, while in many ways compelling, such a historically deterministic view of the relational geography of volunteering and development ignores what Rigg terms the 'hidden geometries of development' (2012, 1). Giving a twist to Massey's (1993) notion of power-geometry, Rigg argues that the 'unseen, unplanned and unexpected' (2012, 3) contribute to

the 'power of ordinary events in shaping development' (2012, 109). Structured by the neoliberal ordering of development but not necessarily contained by it, we would argue that spaces of coming together around volunteering and development provide useful illustrations of these hidden geometries. Furthermore, attention to these geometries then opens new intellectual spaces for interrogating the geography of volunteering and development, bringing into focus its location within the changing geopolitics of aid and development and the new actors and agencies that this promises.

In what follows, drawing across five distinct empirical research projects, we develop an expanded account of the relationalities of volunteering and development looking beyond those between international volunteer and host and towards more complex and diverse sets of articulations. We outline a set of interventions that we argue can unsettle established geographies of volunteering, opening up spaces for more critical debate on the relationships between volunteering and development more generally.

## Hidden geometries of volunteering and development

Often it is unexpected everyday experiences that can prove to be the most transformative elements of volunteering rather than the planned activities of volunteering work itself (e.g. Burns *et al.* 2015). In these contexts the fixed geographies of giver and receiver, such as those described by Crossley (2012) in volunteer tourism, can become weakened, opening possibilities for the negotiation of roles in ways that problematise existing ideas of development and agency (e.g. Griffiths 2014). This underlines the importance of adopting an analytical framework that works beyond single projects and beyond the established actors, institutions and spaces that have characterised dominant geographies of volunteering and development. Diary-based research on faith-based volunteering indicates that this process of transformation can involve re-imagining the geography of power relations associated with development knowledge and expertise.

Dad and I tried to build a support for the water filter. You would think an architect and an engineer would be perfect for this job. We spent ages making it, adding supports and it still ended up quite unstable. One of the locals wandered over and built one in a matter of seconds. This instantly gave me masses of respect for him. It shows that it doesn't matter how much Westernised training you've had and that these guys were more intelligent than us westerners often give them credit for. (Diary entry from James, a British volunteer in Bolivia, in a solicited diary kept as part of the research process)

Reflective narratives such as this offer us the opportunity to rescue political and transformative possibilities from an increasingly critiqued development tourism. However, if such analyses remain at the

level of the individual volunteer, as is often the case in volunteering and development and volunteer tourism scholarship, they risk side-lining what can be learnt from embedding such findings within the wider neoliberal institutional context that frames contemporary development relations as these are being worked and re-worked through a changing geopolitics of development and aid.

Here the example of volunteer hosting in India, drawn from research on NGO professionalisation in Tamil Nadu, is a useful illustration of how the complex re-workings of donor–recipient identities in India has implications for structuring volunteering and development relationships. In this example the ‘spaces of coming together’ around development are produced through the changing geopolitics of aid, but also via the unexpected and accidental. Despite its status as one of the five BRICS<sup>4</sup> countries, India continues to be seen as an iconic volunteering destination with a long history of hosting international volunteers engaged in development work. This context interacts in unexpected ways with domestic policy-making and outcomes as well as the shifting economic fortunes of the specific localities where international volunteers are placed. Fieldwork on the transnational connections of civil society activists in Tamil Nadu (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2012) revealed how changing patterns of funding for civil society organisations shape the hosting of international volunteers in unexpected ways. A director of a human rights NGO, an area of Indian civil society activity which has been subject to restrictions on receiving foreign funding (Nair 2013), noted how their hosting of volunteers could sometimes attract unwanted attention from local police:

The police see non-Indians, of course there are also non-Indian who are not white, [but] it's always the colour that matters here. We have lots of fellows. We have a fellow from Singapore sitting, we had Dhaka, we had Nepal, Sri Lanka. No problems at all ... only when the Europeans and the American come here then we get into a little bit of problem. [The police say] ‘What are these people who are so much in love with you?’ I say tourists. ‘What tourism is this, we never see them go out, they are always sitting here, in computers, so what the hell are you doing?’ I respond saying ‘no, no, no, they come here, they check mails and then go’. But then they don't go ... I see them working till 8. Because we have visas now, we have visa problems. We keep them here, because they come on tourist visa, [so] they just sit. Protests and all, we don't allow them to come anywhere near [those]. (Charles, Indian man, NGO Director, Tamil Nadu, India 2009)

Here we can see how an organisational desire to host both national and international volunteers from Asia as well as Europe and North America articulates with political and administrative processes. This scenario produces complex positionings of volunteers and their

relationships to development that complicate planned and instrumental narratives suggested by volunteering as part of ‘D’ development. In a similar vein, another NGO activist in Tamil Nadu who works on children's rights and empowerment felt that the presence of international visitors, including us as researchers, in his district would attract unwanted attention. As a result, we conducted our interviews with this particular NGO activist in a nearby town. Despite such constraints, during the same time period a number of organisations working on child labour in that district were approached by a large commercial international volunteering organisation and asked to take international volunteers for a small weekly fee which would be paid to the host organisation. Here, a highly politicised issue like child labour comes together with the commercial capacity to make money from the desire of international volunteers to work with children in India at a time of reduced funding.

The above discussion indicates that which volunteers are hosted and where they are located – physically and discursively – is more complex than neoliberal logics or the programming priorities of northern agencies. It also reflects contestation and negotiation from global South civil society actors as they negotiate both ‘d’ and ‘D’ development (see also Frilund 2015). Understanding these processes requires us to go beyond a geography of volunteering based on an analysis of ‘the criteria used by volunteer-tourism NGOs for choosing countries and locations for their work’ (Keese 2011, 275) and beyond calls for a relational geography that focuses on connections between apparently discrete places. We need to delve deeper into the terrain of the ‘spaces of coming together’ produced by the hidden geometries of development and volunteering in order to explore how these geometries allow us to see a different landscape of development. Our approach takes a flattened topography of volunteering as a starting point for thinking differently about volunteering and development.

## Flattened topography

By introducing the notion of flattened topographies of development volunteering we are interested in levelling the heightened emphasis on difference (and individual experiences of difference) that characterises much of the international volunteering and volunteering tourism literatures. Such flattening allows us to see different topographies in the ‘spaces of coming together’ around development volunteering. This requires that we challenge not only the spatialising of volunteering and development discourses and scholarship, but also the ways these work through particular temporalities, biographies and institutional framings. Through this, we can focus attention on how development and subjectivities are co-produced across and between

spaces in ways that change over time. Such an approach demands that we then look between the established spaces and places of development and beyond conventional ideas of who development actors are and how their careers form. This includes identifying different rhythms and routines of volunteering, as well as different subjectivities, biographies and forms of career-making that cut across North–South spatialities and temporalities.

### *Rhythms and routines*

For many Australasian, European and North American gap year students, their overseas placement provides time out to reflect on what they have in material terms and to see something more of the world (e.g. Simpson 2004 2005). Nevertheless, for many of these young people this has become part of an expected ritual, repeated each year by different cohorts whose make up reflects their wider capacity for mobility. Such normalcy reflects what Reid-Henry describes as broader processes of ‘ordering morality’ associated with

humanitarianisms’ mediation of the disruptive effects of global circuits of capital ... More than ever before, contemporary humanitarianism’s offers western citizens a means of addressing the fact that their enjoyment of wealth and privilege falls alongside poverty and suffering of others elsewhere. (2014, 426)

For others who are perhaps older, the motivation and experience is often different and more of an unusual event in their lives. This point is illustrated by the comments of a staff member in a leading faith-based development NGO that works through volunteer placements.

Some people definitely, you know, just feel a lot more alive if they’ve had the chance to escape after many many years of living in quite nice but quite secluded rural England, or rural UK life, and to have their eyes opened to some of their [advantages] ... And I think for some, as well, it’s actually getting over the mind-set of, look at me, I’m healthy, wealthy and rich. (Angela, programme manager, faith-based volunteer engaging NGO, UK 2009)

By contrast, from the perspective of host organisations, many of which are paid to take volunteers, visits can become necessary but onerous events that take them away from the everyday aspects of their development work. As the same staff worker explains:

I think, whilst it’s always the wish of all of our teams to really integrate into the life and work of a project, inevitably, if you’re hosting a team for two weeks, for the host it does feel like an event, and a lot of their time is [taken up] ... Certainly a lot of their staff are connected with that visit while they’re there, taken up with the hosting and the time spent with that. (Angela, British woman, programme manager, faith-based volunteer engaging NGO, UK 2009)

As hosting often occurs quite frequently, this distraction can become routine in the life of an organisation and the communities they may work with (see Tiessen and Heron 2012).

However, it is not always the case that routines and rhythms are as one-way or perhaps as constraining as the above discussion would suggest. Conservation volunteering research at a South African cheetah project illustrates the level of complexity involved with the ‘spaces of coming together’ generated around volunteering, conservation and development. It resembles a classic volunteer tourism project, relying heavily on a frequent supply of international volunteers to deliver its outreach programme. International volunteers are recruited directly by the sanctuary through its website and a number of organisations in Europe also pay a fee for the sanctuary to host their volunteers. Volunteers are largely young Europeans and Australians, although a number of older volunteers and national volunteers also participate regularly and a South African ex-volunteer manages the programme as a paid employee. Volunteering is therefore a routinised part of the sanctuary’s activities and the cheetah project could not run without it. This sets up some interesting spaces of coming-together that challenge the arguments in the volunteering and development literature about how volunteering biographies are made, as we elaborate below.

### *Volunteering subjectivities*

Much empirical research on how development is understood highlights the persistence of established motifs of poverty rooted in media-dominated public representations through ideas of charity and need (e.g. Baillie Smith *et al.* 2013; Mostafanezhad 2013b). In the cheetah project such motives shaped volunteers’ reactions and responses to encounters with development. When asked if she had seen much poverty, for example, a young German volunteer reproduced ‘poor but happy’ stereotypes catalogued by Crossley (2012) in volunteer tourism, while feeling paralysed by those same representations.

Near the township, there are lots of people with no things. It’s very sad. In our apartment there are other volunteers (German girls) and they work in the townships with kids. It’s very nice to do this. I can’t do this, I’m too sad to see them and reflect on them. People in the apartment have become my friends; they say the people are very friendly, open, welcoming and they have no things and lots of kids and they have no things and I can’t help them. (Katarina, young German woman, South Africa 2011)

For this young woman the collision of the moral agendas of development and conservation volunteering in South Africa produced a spatiality based on the need to keep the spaces where she could potentially



encounter poverty separate from her everyday world of conservation and volunteering. Doing so reveals how poverty and development come to be seen as things that can be compartmentalised; in this way, the lens of a 'project' fixes global work and activities in physical and discursive spaces that can then be stepped into and out of at particular moments in people's biographies. While she may choose not to step into that space, her volunteering still constitutes a contingent relationship with wider development practices and contexts. The spatialising and separating of development from conservation does not signify its 'absence'; rather, we argue for the need to pay greater attention to the different and often hidden ways in which it is 'present'.

An older British couple who spend part of each year in South Africa and volunteer in the sanctuary illustrate this further. For them, stepping in and out of the cheetah project has become a sustained practice over a long time and has been fundamental in shaping the different spaces they live their lives through and the connections and ruptures between them. Responding to a question about whether they do conservation volunteering in the UK, they talked about the different lives they lead in each place.

No we are quite wrapped up in our lives here [UK]. I have my church commitments. I've always had my church commitments. [My wife] spends a lot of time now with the grandchildren. I like music so I do a bit of orchestra playing on the double bass. So I have my interests. We decided when we went to Africa we'd have a different life. So I do ... I go to church there, sometimes I go to the cathedral in Cape Town something like that, but I don't want to get sucked into the same sort of type of life that I have here, there. So that's one of the reasons we like to go to [the cheetah project] because it's like we have a life here and we have a life there. (Dave, retired British man, UK 2011)

These examples reinforce the here and there at work in relational geographies of development and volunteering. In the first case, this is time and place-bound. In the second, the relational geographies involve on-going reflection on lives lived in both places. Both examples illustrate the need to be attentive to a wider range of volunteering temporalities and relationalities than has hitherto been the case if the nuances of volunteering subjectivities and their links to development are to be understood.

These sorts of findings fit with emerging work on Diaspora volunteering (Thomas 2016), where the informal ways in which churches, mosques and community groups encourage or sponsor young people to visit partner groups internationally also offer development experiences, as well as solidarity friendships. In these contexts young people do not necessarily see themselves as volunteers or their work as development, even though their activities generate specific spatialities of development volunteering. The following quotation

from a young Nepali living in the UK, drawn from joint doctoral research by Nisha Thomas with VSO on Diaspora volunteering (Thomas 2016), illustrates this.

I don't know if I can call it volunteering work, but I have been working with different community groups. One being my own Maidstone Nepali Community, I am like the Youth Co-ordinator of that group. There is a different Ghorkha Youth Group where we have about 100 members; I am part of that as well. I have my own charity group as well, it is called Project United. The overall aim of this group is to unite all villages. Because even though I am a Ghorkha, I have so many other friends who are from other villages. So I told them, why not we unite together, you represent your village and I represent my village committee and that way we have a stronger team and we can go to Nepal as a team. (Gautham, young Nepalese Diaspora volunteer, UK 2013)

Geographical and community connectivity is strong in this example of Diaspora volunteering, pointing to the disruptive potential of the hidden geometry of development volunteering. Diaspora volunteers do often see themselves as a type of insider (Thomas 2016), frequently investing in the emotional work of 'long-distance political subjectivity' (Faria 2014, 1053). Like the older British couple who spend three months a year in South Africa, this can distinguish them in their minds from other more mainstream volunteers and allow them to forge different volunteering rhythms across space and time. As the man explains:

You've got different kinds of volunteers – you've got local volunteers. We would be local, we are local volunteers because we live in South Africa and we go and work for them and international volunteers are the students who go out and live in the club house and I think they get a small allowance. They are there 5 days out of every 7 when they are there. We certainly couldn't do that. 1 day a week is enough for me because it's hard work being with the cheetahs, in the heat and all that. (Dave, retired British man, UK 2011)

The story above and that of Diaspora volunteering complicate established geographies of international volunteering that privilege particular categories of home and particular episodic approaches to development. In these accounts, who is local and who is international is not straightforward, and how people volunteer over time is complex, reflecting contrasting capacities to choose where and how to live, shaped by uneven economic and development fortunes.

### *Volunteering biographies and career-making*

While the experience of volunteers in development has been increasingly framed in relation to CV-building and professionalisation discourses, these have focused almost exclusively on the opportunities afforded to northern volunteers. Such a vision sidelines a global economic geography where joblessness and exclusion are persistent features of neoliberal policies shared

across the globe, particularly among young people in sub-Saharan Africa (Ansell *et al.* 2013; Gough *et al.* 2013; Jones and Chant 2009) and parts of South Asia (Jeffrey 2010).

Job opportunities in unstable employment markets often rely on complex networks of contacts built up through volunteer and internship experiences. In this context, for South African nationals, volunteering at the cheetah sanctuary has also become a step on the ladder to paid employment and an opportunity to gain practical training as part of a formal qualification in conservation. A regular trickle of national volunteers comes through the system each year and, at the time of fieldwork, a long-term South African volunteer had been working unpaid for a year as part of her nature conservation programme at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in George, South Cape. For a British volunteer at the cheetah sanctuary, it was the UK recession that initially shaped his experience. He explained how, at the suggestion of his employer, he accepted a longer unpaid sabbatical:

I've been working for such a long time, 5 years in my last company. It was high pressure and I wanted to take time out. I asked for 2 months sabbatical then they said take longer ... Obviously they can't keep jobs open ... because of the job market at the moment they can't guarantee ... I will keep in touch and see them when I get back. (Nigel, late 30s/early 40s British man, South Africa 2011)

The South African volunteer manager also explained his own journey through volunteering to employment in relation to the depressed economic development scenario in his country. Having dropped out of university to take up his current full time paid position, he explained:

[I am] turning 22 with lots of responsibilities [smiles]. Obviously what I studied was not what I was interested in. Now I'm intending maybe to do a degree in field guiding ... [My parents] were not keen when I was a volunteer. Now that I am earning a salary they are pleased, finding a job in this country ... so many of my mum's friends their kids don't have jobs. So many people have degrees and don't get jobs. (William, young South African man, South Africa 2011)

Such scenarios are common globally as findings from the recent Global Review on Volunteering (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015) by The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent revealed. For example, Red Cross programme managers in Cameroon and Belize indicate the complex interweaving of volunteering through unemployment and career-making in different settings.

Unemployment, of course it does [affect us] but ... If the question is whether people come to the Red Cross because they're unemployed. I am not sure. I think that many come to the Red Cross because they are motivated enough and they know what the Red Cross can offer them. But I also

think that they can find work thanks to the Red Cross, because today, if you look at the working world today, the dimension of civic action, an experience in civic action is sometimes appreciated as added value in a candidate's profile when compared to a candidate who has no experience in civic action, in the culture of civic action. (Olivier, Red Cross programme manager, Cameroon. Global Review interview 2014)

Another thing is that what is happening to us, the same beneficiaries, the people that we support, the people that we serve, are the ones that can come and volunteer, but yet they have to have jobs, because they need an income. So this again affects our better quality and our level of volunteerism that we attract. (Anna, Red Cross programme manager, Belize. Global Review interview 2014)

Focusing on volunteering biographies and career-making in the specific context of discourses of crisis and unemployment further highlights how the spaces of coming together around volunteering and development are structured by neoliberal orderings of development and poverty. These orderings transcend, as well as entrench, established spatial, temporal and institutional imaginaries. The example of CV-building at the cheetah sanctuary reveals how, in such settings, multiple strategies of volunteering as CV enhancement come together to co-produce each other, revealing the potential agency at play in such spaces. Referring to his own future life plans, the South African volunteer manager indicates that such agency is not easily spatially contained. In the following quotation he emphasises the potential mobilities and economies of solidarity that can be forged through volunteering.

Here I have a five-year plan. I don't see this place as a stepping stone. It might work out if things work out. But if I can't see how things can work out in this country then I have a European passport so maybe I'll go to a zoo there. I have a lot of friends around the world now, especially when I was a volunteer and not their boss. If I ever have to go anywhere, I won't have to pay! (William, young South African man, South Africa 2011)

These examples above suggest that the mobilities afforded by international volunteering, which are deemed so central to its impacts, need to be located within a more nuanced understanding of contemporary patterns of mobility and encounter. This is not to say that everyone has opportunities of transnational mobility, but rather that viewing volunteering through the lens of a limited, time bound, single one-way North–South movement, or even the reverse, is inadequate. It fails to capture the very ordinary aspects of volunteering and tends to privilege accounts of the (young) northern volunteer, while ignoring the similar dynamics at work among and between diverse volunteers in other settings. Furthermore, such an emphasis obscures the

more complex and fluid relationalities of volunteering and development throughout people's lives.

The quotation below, from a volunteer in Sierra Leone talking with an IFRC staff member in 2013, also reminds us that there is more to consider in the topography of volunteering and development than the privileging of mobility. The desire to 'stay put' and freedom and safety to do so are also significant factors shaping volunteering and development.

I would be dead now if it weren't for the Red Cross. I would have been killed in the war but because I was volunteering for the Red Cross, I was spared. I owe my life to the Red Cross and I'll never leave. (Field notes from IFRC staff member in Sierra Leone 2013, collected as part of the Global Review on Volunteering)

Such biographies are an important counter to the potential fetishisation of planned mobility in volunteering and development literatures to date; such movements between national settings have often obscured the more complex mobilities and fixings and individual, institutional and organisational comings together that shape contemporary volunteering and development spaces. They also shift attention away from the over-emphasis in research on northern CV-building, itself a product of the ways in which geographical imaginations have been captured and contained by neoliberal framings of development in Geography and Tourism Studies.

## Conclusion

Financial, cultural, political and emotional investments in a partial geography of volunteering have produced a dominant set of policy debates, initiatives and intellectual framings. To date, the South and development have often been packaged together, economically distinguished and spatially separated out from the North, frequently constituted as a contained space that particular types of volunteers are able to step into and out of. In this paper we have sought to unsettle this geography of volunteering and development by offering two new conceptual interventions, which call for greater attention to be given to the more complex relationalities and temporalities of volunteering and development.

First we have drawn attention to the hidden geometries of volunteering and development. This has enabled us to look beyond conventional understandings, focused on narrow timeframes (e.g. before and after narratives of volunteering placements) and projects and has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of volunteering and development subjectivities. Second, we have introduced the notion of flattened topographies of development volunteering to level the emphasis on difference. This enables us to construct a geography of volunteering and

development across biographies, distance, inequality and national and international approaches. This makes visible new volunteers and development actors, and also reveals different rhythms and routines of volunteering. In so doing, it opens up understandings of the agency promised by volunteering that move beyond fixing different categories of volunteers and hosts, givers and receivers, instead 'unfixing' agency from particular subjectivities (e.g. northern, southern, older, gap year, faith-based, secular, diaspora, national). These categories become partially redundant as greater analytical emphasis is given to their contingent location within the more complex relationalities of development over time.

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## Notes

- 1 RES-451-26-0561, AH/G016461/1.
- 2 For more details of broader research findings see Hopkins *et al.* (2015); Baillie Smith *et al.* (2013).
- 3 She refers to the 'post-Second World War project of intervention in the "third world" that emerged in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, and "little d" development as the development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of historical processes' (Hart 2001, 650).
- 4 Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

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